

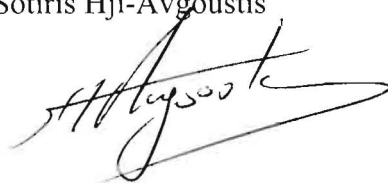
Event Planning on the Ball State University Campus: A Beginner's Handbook

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. Hji-Avgoustis', with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

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Abstract

Ball State University caters to special events ranging from academics and business to athletics and performance arts. With access to diverse facilities, advanced technology, and comprehensive services, campus events can be implemented successfully for an enriched experience by students, faculty, and professionals alike. The purpose of this creative project is to identify and develop the necessary tools and resources needed to plan a campus event. The handbook will explain what services are available for an event and the process of planning from beginning to end. The handbook is intended to be available in the Office of Student Life on campus for student organizations, advisors, faculty, and other professionals to access as a resource for their planning needs. Having easily accessible information on hand in a single location will assist future planners with all their event needs, eliminating any confusion or lack of necessary documents.

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Author's Statement

Ball State University has a wide array of events that occur each and every year. The academic calendar features events such as theater productions, sporting events, professionally renowned speakers, Greek life philanthropies, and musical performances. The abundance of diverse events helps create an enriching campus life experience for all students. According to the university's website, "Ball State brings excitement to Muncie that most Midwestern cities would envy, without forgoing any of that college charm". In order to execute all of these events, Ball State has several resources available that can ease the planning process. With access to diverse facilities, advanced technology, and comprehensive services, campus events can be implemented successfully.

For my senior honors thesis, I created an event planning handbook to assist future planners. As a graduating hospitality and food management student, I have held several leadership positions and have work experience within the event industry. During my collegiate years, I have noticed that planning an event through the university can be easier than most may think. As a student, we are granted access to free or inexpensive venues, services, transportation, equipment, and much more. Although these resources are available, not all of the information is advertised to students. The information is also hard to find, even with the assistance of the Ball State website search engine. The creation of this handbook will eliminate this information barrier and act as a resource to future event planners.

With the support of Ball State faculty and staff, I researched the necessary information for my handbook through secondary sources such as Internet resources, the university website, and existing handbooks. By conducting interviews with Ball State's event professionals, I was able to supplement my own research and knowledge with the expertise of our university

employees. The handbook is intended to be available in the Office of Student Life and on the university website for student organizations, advisors, faculty, and other professionals to access as a resource for their planning needs.

In addition to the primary research for the handbook, I carried out a literature review to explore the context and specialized knowledge of event management to build my project upon. A review of scholarly journals, event management textbooks, and similar planning handbooks occurred. The purpose of this literature review was to become aware of the types of events that currently take place on Ball State's campus, become familiar with the types of services needed to execute an event, review some of the contemporary practices used in event management, and strengthen my knowledge of the skills and steps required to design, produce and evaluate a special event. The literature review also allowed me to stay engaged with new ideas and trends in the event industry.

Introduction

The event planning industry has grown and evolved tremendously over the past decade. Special events are quickly becoming the main attraction for tourism around the world (Yen and Yu, 2012). As a society of individuals that value entertainment and recreation, the need for events continue to rise as time progresses. A growing amount of universities and colleges are adopting event management courses and academic programs, which in turn escalate the industry and produce new careers. Events provide society with opportunities for economic growth, celebration of culture, community involvement, and recreation for friends and family (Yen and Yu, 2012). To appreciate this growing industry, it is important to understand the basics of planning an event from beginning to end. The purpose of this literature review is to identify and describe the steps required before, during, and after an event to ensure its success. These steps are categorized into three phases: planning, implementing, and evaluating. This literature review is built upon supportive material acquired from academic journals, books, and magazines. By learning the crucial steps of event planning, individuals can perfect programs to set them apart from others.

Literature Review

Special events can range from academics and business to athletics and performance arts. With access to diverse facilities, advanced technology, and comprehensive services, event planning is easier now more than ever. In order to use these services to your best ability, you must first research the changing industry and related trends. Allen (2009) emphasizes “knowledge is the key to success and it is what will set you apart from your competition both personally and professionally” (p. xx). By planning ahead carefully and paying attention to

details, your event will be set up for success. One of the key predictors of success is identifying and satisfying your target market's motivations. Yen and Yu (2012) define motivation as "a force for people to act to satisfy their needs and wants" (p. 35). Event professionals believe the top human motivators are socialization, family gathering and togetherness, escapism from boredom or stress, novelty, cultural exploration, and community pride (Yen and Yu, 2012). For college students specifically, Yen and Yu (2012) argue that the top motivators for attending events are entertainment or having fun, food, and social activities. By gathering this information, event planners can design and implement events that interest and satisfy their target market.

Planning

The first step of the event creation process is planning. Before you begin designing the event, you must first ask yourself a few questions: 1) Why is the event being held? 2) Who is your target audience? 3) Where will the event be held? 4) When will the event be held? 5) What is the purpose of the event? And 6) How will you make the event stand out? By answering these questions, you will be able to identify the organizational needs and client objectives, both day of and long-term, to select the right kind of event that will be capable of delivering to those needs. Bell (2014) suggests never underestimating the importance of brainstorming, for exploring opportunities and new possibilities among team members of an organization can cultivate tremendous event success. Be creative with your event details but make sure you follow all university, local, state, and federal government rules and regulations.

When planning your event, is it also important to distinguish between event wants and event needs. After answering the questions above, you must then assess your budget and determine how much money you can spend. Your budget will regulate what wants and needs you

can afford. For example, an outdoor evening event may *need* security to control the crowds but you may also *want* glow sticks to pass out at the door. By assessing your organizational budget, you can decide whether or not the glow sticks will be purchased for the event or left at the store to save money for the event necessities, like security. If your event wants seem valuable to the success or failure of the program but you cannot afford them, you may want to expand upon your organizational budget to accumulate more spending money. Increasing organization member dues, increasing event registration fees, pairing with other university student organizations, or seeking sponsorships from local businesses can help expand event budgets.

Getz (2005) discusses the options of fundraising, grants, and sponsorships to acquire resources that will support your event. He reports the “inability to secure sufficient resources is a leading cause of event failure, so competency in generating revenue and in financial management is extremely important” (Getz, 2005). It is vital that the individual handling the budget has been trained properly and works alongside organizational leaders to ensure proper financial management. Fiscal responsibility is crucial before, during, and after an event. Timely payments of invoices, wages, and depositing of funds should be handled immediately. Sponsorships or collaboration with other organizations can build up your event. Bramwell (1997) suggests “participatory planning processes are very important . . . as these projects can change the structure and meaning of place and residents’ relationships with their community and locality” (p. 175). Involving partner organizations, city representatives, or community members can strengthen the economic and societal impact of your event, as well as bring the attention of local news, newspapers, and online articles thus increasing notoriety. These sources could also potentially become a new source of revenue for future events. Pickett (2002) agrees with Bramwell, stating, “collaboration between non-profit agencies and campus organizations can

help build connections with the campus and community” (p. 1). These connections can increase your event attendance, raise donations, and establish networking relationships to build upon in the future.

Once the event objectives and budget have been assessed, the next step is choosing an event date and location. Appleby and Pemberton (2010) argue that one of “the most important steps for hosting a successful and sustainable event [is] to choose a date and select and reserve an appropriate facility” (p.35). The key here is to be flexible, for coordinating events with other organizations may be difficult depending on the time of year. Klevorn (2013) also touches on this idea, stating that you should research the location your event will be held and identify when big city events are to avoid any scheduling conflicts or competition of similar events. Planning around these big events will maximize the attendance your event experiences, benefiting your organization in the end. Getz (2005) adds that “visibility” should be considered when selecting an event location. Choosing well-known venues, outdoor locations, or easily accessible areas will assist with event attendance, parking, and guest satisfaction.

There are several other logistical details that need determined within the event planning phase to establish success. Event logistics could include food and beverage, setup, labor, promotion, risk management, security, vendor contracting, and alternative event plans in case of inclement weather. Many of these logistics must be evaluated based on your event budget. While all of these details are important, I believe two of the most pertinent aspects are promotion and risk management. Diekroeger (2014) puts it simply: “If nobody knows, nobody will attend” (p. 14). It is important to advertise your event so people attend and all of your hard work does not go unnoticed.

Effective marketing includes word of mouth, flyers, banners, press releases, emails, social media, organizational meeting announcements and visits, and tents or tables in public areas. Appleby and Pemberton (2010) claim, “follow-up and persistence are key aspects of effective event promotion” (p.37). Building support for your event may take time, so it is crucial to begin promoting as soon as possible. As busy individuals with demanding schedules, our society tends to need to be reminded about events. To increase your event’s visibility, Elgammal (2012) recommends a well designed website. As Internet usage has increased in our world of growing technology, event promotion on your organization’s website is one of the most effective tools. McCoy (2013) stresses, “historical trends and economic factors also can play key roles” in determining your target market (p. 44). By analyzing successful past events and your current target market, you can easily evaluate the amount of promotion needed to fulfill the event requirements.

In addition to the promotion of an event, risk management is a significant step in the planning phase. Getz (2005) defines risk management as “the process of anticipating, preventing, or minimizing potential costs, losses, or problems for the event, organization, partners, and guests” (p. 284-285). Event planners need to do everything possible ahead of time to eliminate any risks or liabilities. This could include hiring security or law enforcement, providing medical assistance, setting up barricades, closing off streets, creating liability waivers with the assistance of legal counsel, and compiling a written list of emergency contact phone numbers. All members and volunteers facilitating the event must be knowledgeable about these implementations and know the proper procedures should an incident occur. The main idea is to create redundancy so that anyone can step in for the event professional should something happen the day of the event. When all members are educated about the logistics of the event, the day can proceed without any

interruptions. Diekroeger (2014) recommends the “best rule of thumb is to make NO assumptions” (p. 16). You must investigate all avenues, including event location emergency protocols, to ensure all individuals at the event are protected and safe.

After planning all of the event objectives and details, you are ready to finalize your plans before the big day. Allen (2009) reminds us that the “event is a reflection of your company image. Keep in mind that what you do today sets the tone for tomorrow and can work both for and against you in building momentum for your next event” (p. 40). Every event shapes and molds your brand or reputation, so you must plan the event down to every last detail to ensure success. Some experts believe you are only as good as your last event. One of the last steps in the planning phase is defining and setting goals for your event. Assess the success of your event by the number of attendees, number of dollars raised, level of satisfaction of guests, or overall soothing flow of the event. This will allow you to evaluate each event to assist in the planning of future programs.

Implementation

The second step of the event planning process is implementation. Bell (2014) suggests “on the day of the event, stick to your plan” (p. 21). While changes may occur, your pre-planning should have addressed all event needs and tasks to ensure smooth facilitation on all levels. It is recommended that event coordinators have all paperwork on hand the day of the event, including but not limited to timelines, contracts, contact information, venue diagrams, venue reservations, event advertisements, and volunteer names and tasks. As an event planner, you are integrated into the hospitality and service industry. Pagios and Adler (2013) argue, “we provide entertainment and educational opportunities with the hope of creating a customer base that loves

our events, comes back, and recommends them to others” (p. 43). No matter what phase of the planning process you are in, your focus should always be on customer satisfaction.

Pagios and Adler (2013) continue the idea of customer satisfaction in relation to the Walt Disney brand, reporting, “success is achieved by building the best product, giving people the training to deliver exceptional service, learning from experiences, and celebrating accomplishments” (p. 43). As hospitality professionals, we must design and implement events around the customer, going above and beyond to wow them with our attention to detail. Elgammal (2012) agrees with Disney, suggesting that training is needed for successful events. He also suggests an academic “background in tourism and event planning would be greatly beneficial” to the success of your event (p. 13). With the aid of professional expertise and knowledge gained in training, workshops, or related courses, events can be implemented with skilled quality of work. Getz (2005) complements this idea when he notes “program and service quality management are essential to satisfying guests and customers and to meeting the event’s goals” (p. 164). Developing service standards and establishing desired needs, wants, and emotional feedback from each event is vital in the implementation phase.

Throughout the day of the event, clear and constant communication is key. Since you have already put in the long hours to guarantee that the event runs smoothly, the actual day of the event may actually seem less hectic than you imagined. During an interview with the Director of Experience and Education at Minnetrista in Muncie, Indiana, George Buss mentioned that event implementation includes constant monitoring of guest experiences (personal communication, March 19, 2014). Event planners, volunteers, and other related facilitating leaders should focus on indicators of success during the duration of each event. Mentally surveying event attendees’ facial expressions, body language, interactions, and conversations can illustrate the success of

your event. Buss noted, “If guests are smiling, sharing memories, and enjoying the activities set in place, you can assume your event was a success.” After all, great customer service and hard work can make or break an event.

Another task during the implementation of events is constantly monitoring guests’ actions for the safety of all attendees and workers. Morrison (1990) writes, “strategic planning, like the best operational planning, seeks to reduce uncertainty by considering what is likely to happen along with possibilities of what could happen” (p. 6). By identifying and controlling possible obstacles or risks, you can eliminate any consequences that may negatively affect the guest experience. Overall, paying attention to the details and planning ahead for change will ensure the ultimate success of your event.

Evaluation

The third and final step of the event planning process is evaluation. This step is often overlooked by event planners that quickly move on to the next event once one concludes. Evaluation and assessment of each event may actually be the most important part of the planning process, for it can determine the success or failure of your next event. Poindexter and Lamarre (2013) believe “the primary purpose of assessment is to identify the intentions and learning outcomes for your program” (p. 22). By evaluating what did and did not work for the event, you can learn from each experience and improve future programs. Elgammal (2012) argues developing understanding and measuring the outcomes of an event can “prevent failure and discontinuation” (p. 18). Another form of evaluation is assessing an event’s ability to attract guests and promote repeat attendance. Elgammal (2012) stresses this can create guest loyalty and contribute to their overall satisfaction with an event. It is important to document your evaluation

methods in an organizational file or binder. This evaluation can always be used in the promotion of an event or build upon the reputation of past events. It is also important to go back to that evaluation when initially planning other events or recurring events to see how you can improve. Using your event history and guest comments from past years to form a future event can be very beneficial. By taking the time to address your guests' needs and acknowledging the positive *and* negative experiences, you can form an event that exceeds expectations. Any opportunity for customer service recovery is essential, for guests will share poor experiences more than good ones. This may damage your organization's reputation and harm future event attendance.

Furthermore, Pickett (2002) makes reference to the Student Activities website of the University of Notre Dame when he notes "organizational self-assessment is necessary to understand how effectively an organization is operating, as well as providing feedback on how the organization is progressing towards its goals" (p. 7). The evaluation phase connects back to the preliminary planning phase, readdressing those event goals and mission of the organization. You can save time and energy spent on repeating old habits by simply completing an evaluation no later than a week after the event. Often, student leaders and programmers will graduate or leave an organization, bringing their knowledge of past events with them. To eliminate this loss of information, all members of the organization should hold each other accountable and practice documenting all events. Evaluations can be as simple as a written list of pros and cons or a guest survey or questionnaire to place in the program file. Diekroeger (2014) summarizes that "past information can lead to future success" (p. 17). Once evaluation is complete, your organization can successfully move on to the next event and continue progressing.

Conclusion

Planning an event takes the collaborative efforts of many individuals that are willing to put in long hours for the satisfaction of their guests. Elgammal (2012) notes that “raising knowledge and awareness among organizers and planners about the importance of festivals and special events [is] critical and [leads] to more innovative approaches in planning and organizing events” (p. 20). Although this career path seems exhausting with long hours during nights and weekends, it continues to increase in popularity and expand internationally. Event planning as a profession is maturing and grabbing the attention of those studying marketing, public relations, business, and communications. This multi-faceted profession leans on several diverse departments in order to secure event details and ensure guest satisfaction and overall success. Pagios and Adler (2013) conclude, “taking the time to be intentional in enhancing our guests’ experiences is the difference between attending an event and creating magical, everlasting memories” (p. 45). Ultimately, the customer’s experience and perception of an event is your reality. If you take care of your customers, the event will take care of itself.

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